Evangelicalism — OVSI Summary

Preamble

Evangelicalism is one of the most dynamic and influential forms of Christianity in the modern world, yet it remains elusive to define with precision. It is not a single church, denomination, or institution, but rather a sprawling, transnational movement that has taken root in diverse cultural, political, and social contexts. Its adherents number in the hundreds of millions, extending across continents from North America to sub-Saharan Africa, from Latin America to East Asia. This sheer diversity raises an immediate problem: how can something so varied still be meaningfully described as a coherent phenomenon?

John G. Stackhouse approaches this question not by forcing evangelicalism into a narrow doctrinal box or reducing it to a historical sequence, but by treating it as a living tradition characterized by a recognizable set of impulses. Evangelicalism, in this account, is less a static system than a dynamic pattern of Christian life. It is rooted in Protestant Christianity, yet it distinguishes itself from both conservative traditionalism and liberal adaptation. Instead, it occupies a kind of middle path, one that seeks to preserve what it understands to be the essential core of Christianity while remaining flexible and innovative in method and expression.

At its heart lies a deep commitment to the "gospel," the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. Evangelicals define themselves as people shaped by this message, devoted to its proclamation, and eager to see its effects extend into every domain of life. This commitment manifests in both belief and practice, combining theological convictions with an activist orientation. Evangelicalism is not content with passive adherence; it is inherently missionary, seeking to convert individuals and transform societies.

Historically, evangelicalism emerges out of the Protestant Reformation and gains distinct shape through movements such as Puritanism and Pietism. It comes into full bloom during the revivalist awakenings of the eighteenth century, associated with figures like George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and the Wesley brothers. These early "ur-evangelicals" forged a style of Christianity marked by personal conversion, heartfelt piety, and energetic outreach. From these beginnings, the movement expanded globally, adapting to new contexts while retaining its core emphases.

The modern era has proven especially conducive to evangelical growth. The movement's stress on individual experience, voluntary association, and adaptability aligns closely with broader features of modernity, including globalization, mobility, and the elevation of personal choice. As a result, evangelicalism has flourished in rapidly changing societies, often outpacing more institutionally rigid forms of Christianity. Yet this very compatibility with modernity also introduces tensions, as evangelicals must continually negotiate the pressures of secularization, cultural pluralism, and internal fragmentation.

Stackhouse's project is not merely descriptive but interpretive. He aims to help readers understand what evangelicalism is, how it developed, and why it matters. The book traces a loose historical arc while focusing primarily on the defining characteristics of the movement. It examines both its strengths and its vulnerabilities, its remarkable successes and its ongoing challenges. Throughout, the emphasis remains on evangelicalism as a lived reality, a form of Christianity that is at once deeply rooted in tradition and constantly in motion.

The question that hovers over the entire inquiry is not only what evangelicalism has been, but what it is becoming. As the movement continues to evolve in a rapidly changing world, its future remains open, shaped by the same tensions between continuity and change that have defined it from the beginning.

Preface

This book is written from within evangelicalism, not from a detached academic distance. John G. Stackhouse identifies himself explicitly as an evangelical, shaped by institutions,

communities, and relationships that have both enriched and unsettled him. This dual belonging—loyal yet critical—defines the posture of the work. It is neither a defense nor an attack, but an attempt to understand a complex religious movement with intellectual honesty and personal involvement.

The author signals from the outset that evangelicalism should be approached as a "family." This metaphor is not ornamental; it structures the tone of the inquiry. Families transmit identity, sustain belonging, and shape formation, but they also generate tensions, disappointments, and wounds. Stackhouse's engagement reflects this ambivalence. He writes as someone who has benefited from evangelicalism's institutions and ideals, while also recognizing their limitations, blind spots, and failures. The result is a voice that neither idealizes nor dismisses, but remains engaged.

He also acknowledges the constraints under which the book was produced. Limited access to a wider range of regional specialists meant that he relied on a smaller circle of trusted colleagues. This is more than a logistical note. It underscores a methodological awareness: evangelicalism is too vast, too global, and too internally diverse to be exhaustively captured in a short volume. What follows is therefore not a definitive account, but a disciplined synthesis—an effort to distill patterns rather than catalog every variation.

The prefatory remarks make clear that the book's purpose is not primarily historical. Although history will provide the narrative scaffolding, the central aim is analytical: to identify the character of evangelicalism. Stackhouse is less interested in listing events than in isolating the recurring features that make evangelicalism recognizable across time and place. This shift from chronology to pattern is crucial. It allows the book to move beyond description into interpretation, offering readers a framework for understanding both the unity and diversity of the movement.

At the same time, the author prepares the reader for complexity. Evangelicalism cannot be reduced to a single doctrine, institution, or cultural expression. Any attempt to define it risks either overgeneralization or fragmentation. Stackhouse's solution is to embrace a layered approach, identifying core traits while acknowledging internal variation. This method reflects the reality of evangelicalism itself: a movement held together not by rigid uniformity, but by a constellation of shared commitments.

The institutions that shaped Stackhouse's own formation—InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Wheaton College, Christianity Today, Regent College—are indicative of a particular strand of evangelicalism: intellectually engaged, organizationally sophisticated, and globally connected. Yet even within this strand, tensions persist between faith and scholarship, tradition and innovation, unity and diversity. By situating

himself within this environment, the author implicitly recognizes that his perspective is both informed and limited by a specific vantage point.

The preface also establishes the audience. The book is written for readers who may know little about evangelicalism as well as for those who are deeply familiar with it. It does not assume prior allegiance, nor does it demand it. Instead, it invites inquiry. The tone is explanatory rather than polemical, aiming to clarify rather than persuade.

What emerges is a clear orientation for the work that follows. Evangelicalism will be treated as a living, global, and internally contested form of Christianity. Its history will be traced, but only insofar as it illuminates its defining features. Its strengths will be acknowledged alongside its weaknesses. Its coherence will be explored without denying its diversity.

The reader is thus positioned at the threshold of a study that is both descriptive and diagnostic: an effort to make sense of a movement that continues to shape the religious landscape of the modern world while remaining, in many respects, difficult to pin down.

Introduction

Evangelicalism today stands as one of the most expansive and influential religious movements in the world, yet it defies simple definition. It is not confined to a single denomination, geography, or cultural form. Instead, it operates as a diffuse network of beliefs, practices, institutions, and personalities that together form a recognizable, if internally diverse, mode of Christianity. Its global reach is striking: evangelicals are found in virtually every region, participating in activities that range from local church worship to international humanitarian work, from grassroots evangelism to political engagement.

The scale of evangelical influence raises a central set of questions. Who exactly are evangelicals? Where did they come from? What unites them across such varied contexts? And how can the same movement produce figures and positions that seem, at times, sharply contradictory? These questions frame the inquiry of the book and signal its dual focus on both description and interpretation.

Stackhouse makes clear that his aim is not merely to recount a chronological history. While the narrative will move across time, tracing the development of evangelicalism from its early modern origins to its contemporary global presence, the deeper goal is to uncover its defining characteristics. The structure of the book reflects this priority:

historical episodes are treated not simply as events, but as expressions of enduring traits. In this sense, the history of evangelicalism functions as a case study in its own identity.

The movement traces its roots to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, a period that reshaped Western Christianity and emphasized the authority of Scripture, the centrality of Christ, and the importance of personal faith. From there, evangelicalism takes more distinct shape through the movements of Puritanism in England and Pietism in continental Europe during the seventeenth century. These traditions stressed disciplined piety, heartfelt devotion, and the cultivation of a lived, experiential faith.

The eighteenth century marks a decisive turning point with the rise of transatlantic revival movements. Figures such as George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and John and Charles Wesley played pivotal roles in shaping what Stackhouse calls the era of the "ur-evangelicals." These leaders shared a commitment to preaching the gospel in ways that emphasized personal conversion, emotional engagement, and active discipleship. Their efforts helped forge a recognizable pattern of evangelical life that would persist and expand in the centuries to follow.

From these beginnings, evangelicalism grew into a global phenomenon. It spread through missionary activity, migration, and cultural exchange, adapting to local contexts while maintaining a core set of commitments. Today, it represents one of the largest and most dynamic expressions of Christianity worldwide, influencing not only religious life but also education, politics, media, and social services.

Yet defining evangelicalism remains challenging precisely because of this diversity. It can be understood in multiple ways: as a set of doctrines, as a style of religious practice, as a renewal movement within Protestantism, or as a broader cultural force. Stackhouse suggests that all of these perspectives capture something true, but none is sufficient on its own. Evangelicalism is best understood as a constellation of overlapping features rather than a single, fixed essence.

At its core, however, lies a shared commitment to the "gospel"—the good news of God's saving action through Jesus Christ—and to its proclamation. Evangelicals see themselves as called not only to believe this message but to spread it, shaping both individual lives and the wider world. This combination of conviction and activism gives evangelicalism its distinctive energy and helps explain its remarkable capacity for growth and adaptation.

The introduction thus sets the stage for a deeper exploration of evangelicalism's origins, characteristics, expansion, and challenges. It frames the movement as both historically

grounded and continually evolving, inviting the reader to consider not only what evangelicalism has been, but what it is becoming in a rapidly changing global context.

Chapter 1 — Original evangelicalism

Evangelicalism begins not as an institution, but as a pattern of religious renewal—a recurring impulse within Christianity to recover what is perceived as its authentic core. Its defining instinct is captured in a simple phrase: back to the Bible. Evangelicals understand themselves as people of the gospel, rooted in Scripture as the authoritative account of God's saving work through Jesus Christ. The very term "evangelical" derives from the Greek *euaggelion*, meaning "good news," and signals a self-conscious commitment to proclaiming that message as central to Christian life.

Yet this commitment alone does not distinguish evangelicals from other Christians, since all major Christian traditions affirm the importance of the Bible. What sets evangelicalism apart is the particular intensity and exclusivity of that commitment. Evangelicals elevate Scripture as the supreme authority for faith and practice, often expressing suspicion toward later traditions and ecclesiastical developments. This stance echoes the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* and finds a vivid early expression in Martin Luther's insistence on the primacy of Scripture over church authorities.

The historical roots of evangelicalism lie in a sequence of movements that together forged its characteristic style. The Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century laid the theological groundwork by emphasizing justification by faith, the authority of Scripture, and the centrality of Christ. Building on this foundation, the Puritans in England and the Pietists in continental Europe developed forms of disciplined, experiential Christianity. Both movements stressed the necessity of personal transformation, cultivating small groups, devotional practices, and moral seriousness as means of fostering genuine faith.

These strands converged in the revival movements of the eighteenth century, which mark the emergence of what Stackhouse calls the "ur-evangelicals." This period witnessed a series of awakenings across the Atlantic world, characterized by intense preaching, emotional response, and a focus on personal conversion. Figures such as Jonathan Edwards in New England, George Whitefield traveling widely as an itinerant preacher, and John and Charles Wesley in Britain played central roles in shaping this emerging pattern of religious life.

Despite their differences in theology, denomination, and social context, these leaders recognized in one another a shared vision of authentic Christianity. They emphasized the necessity of what they called the "New Birth," a transformative encounter with God

in which individuals become conscious of their sin, trust in Christ's atoning work, and commit themselves to a life of discipleship. This experience was not merely intellectual assent but a deeply personal and often emotional turning point, marking the beginning of a renewed spiritual life.

The revivalists also shared a common method. They preached in unconventional settings, organized informal gatherings, and relied on networks of communication—letters, pamphlets, and emerging print culture—to spread their message. They were less concerned with maintaining ecclesiastical structures than with fostering spiritual vitality. This flexibility allowed the movement to cross denominational boundaries, creating a loose but recognizable network of like-minded believers.

At the same time, the question arises whether these various awakenings constituted a coherent movement or merely a series of parallel events. Historians note that while there was mutual awareness and occasional cooperation among leaders, there were few formal structures uniting them. What bound them together was not institutional organization but a shared message and style: an emphasis on conversion, a commitment to the authority of Scripture, and a passion for evangelism.

This lack of centralized structure would become a defining feature of evangelicalism. From its earliest stages, it operated as a decentralized, trans-denominational phenomenon, capable of adapting to different contexts while maintaining a core identity. Its unity lay not in hierarchy or doctrine alone, but in a common orientation toward the gospel and its transformative power.

By the end of the eighteenth century, this pattern of revivalist Christianity had crystallized into something recognizable as evangelicalism. It was a movement marked by personal piety, missionary zeal, and a willingness to innovate in order to reach new audiences. It stood in creative tension with established churches, drawing from their traditions while also challenging their complacency.

What emerges from this early history is not a fixed system, but a dynamic ethos. Evangelicalism is defined less by what it is than by what it does: calling individuals to conversion, grounding them in Scripture, and sending them out to proclaim the gospel. This combination of conviction and action would propel the movement far beyond its eighteenth-century origins, shaping its expansion in the centuries to come.

Chapter 2 — Evangelicalism defined

If evangelicalism begins as a historical movement, it quickly becomes a conceptual problem. Its diversity—across denominations, cultures, and theological nuances—makes any simple definition inadequate. Yet without some definitional clarity, the term risks becoming meaningless. Stackhouse approaches this challenge by identifying a cluster of core characteristics that, taken together, distinguish evangelicalism from other forms of Christianity. These are not rigid criteria but overlapping tendencies that create a recognizable family resemblance.

The term itself derives from *euaggelion*, "good news," pointing to the gospel as the movement's central concern. To be evangelical is to orient one's faith and practice around the message of God's saving action through Jesus Christ. Historically, the term has functioned as a badge of authenticity, signaling a commitment to what is perceived as genuine Christianity over against forms considered hollow, corrupt, or merely formal.

Stackhouse organizes his definition around six key descriptors: **Trinitarian, biblicist, conversionist, missional, populist, and pragmatic**. Each captures an essential dimension of evangelical identity.

To begin, evangelicalism is **Trinitarian**. Evangelicals affirm the classical Christian doctrine of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This commitment places them firmly within the bounds of historic Christian orthodoxy and distinguishes them from groups that depart from Trinitarian theology. The triune God is not merely a doctrinal affirmation but the living center of evangelical devotion and experience.

Second, evangelicalism is **biblicist**. Evangelicals regard the Bible as the supreme authority for faith and practice. While other Christians also revere Scripture, evangelicals emphasize its direct accessibility and sufficiency, often expressing skepticism toward later traditions or ecclesiastical authorities. The Bible functions not only as a source of doctrine but as the primary guide for personal and communal life.

Third, evangelicalism is **conversionist**. At its heart lies the insistence that individuals must experience a personal transformation—a "new birth." This is not merely a formal affiliation with a church or adherence to a set of beliefs, but a conscious turning to God marked by repentance, faith, and a commitment to discipleship. The question "Are you a Christian now?" captures this focus on present, lived faith rather than inherited identity.

Fourth, evangelicalism is **missional**. Evangelicals are driven by a sense of responsibility to share the gospel with others. This mission extends beyond verbal proclamation to

include efforts to shape individuals, communities, and societies in accordance with Christian teaching. Evangelical faith is inherently outward-facing, oriented toward expansion and influence.

Fifth, evangelicalism is **populist**. It tends to bypass rigid hierarchies and emphasize accessibility, appealing directly to ordinary people rather than relying solely on clerical or institutional authority. This populist impulse is evident in the movement's use of vernacular language, informal gatherings, and innovative communication methods. It fosters a sense of immediacy and inclusiveness, even as it can sometimes lead to fragmentation or lack of coherence.

Finally, evangelicalism is **pragmatic**. It is willing to adopt whatever methods prove effective in advancing its mission, whether through new forms of media, organizational structures, or cultural engagement. This flexibility has been a key factor in its global expansion, allowing it to adapt to diverse contexts while maintaining its core commitments.

Together, these six characteristics form a composite picture of evangelicalism. They distinguish it not only from liberal Christianity, which tends to modify tradition in light of contemporary thought, but also from conservative traditionalism, which prioritizes the preservation of inherited forms. Evangelicalism occupies a middle space, seeking to remain faithful to what it sees as the essence of Christianity while remaining responsive to present circumstances.

This "third way" involves a creative tension. Evangelicals are anchored in tradition, particularly in Scripture, yet they feel free to innovate in order to fulfill their mission. They are both conservative and adaptive, both rooted and restless. This tension is not a flaw but a defining feature, enabling evangelicalism to remain both recognizable and dynamic across time and place.

Importantly, these characteristics do not always coexist harmoniously. The emphasis on biblical authority can clash with pragmatic adaptation; populist tendencies can undermine theological coherence; missional zeal can lead to cultural entanglements. Evangelicalism is thus marked by internal tensions as much as by shared convictions.

Even so, the sixfold framework provides a useful lens for understanding the movement. It allows us to see how evangelicalism can take different forms while retaining a common identity. It also sets the stage for examining how these traits have played out historically, particularly in the movement's global expansion and its encounter with modern challenges.

What emerges is a portrait of evangelicalism as a flexible yet structured form of Christianity—defined not by a single doctrine or institution, but by a constellation of commitments that together shape a distinctive way of being Christian in the world.

Chapter 3 — Evangelicalism expands

By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, evangelicalism moved from being a transatlantic revival movement to a truly global phenomenon. What had begun among reformers, Pietists, and revivalists in Europe and North America now spread across continents, taking root in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. This expansion was not merely a matter of geographic diffusion; it involved profound processes of adaptation, translation, and transformation that reshaped evangelicalism itself.

One major driver of this expansion was missionary activity. Evangelicals, animated by their missional impulse, sent increasing numbers of missionaries abroad. The growth was dramatic: what had been a relatively small missionary presence in the late nineteenth century became a vast global enterprise within a few decades. These missionaries carried with them not only the message of the gospel but also cultural assumptions shaped by Western Christianity. Yet the spread of evangelicalism cannot be reduced to imperialism. While colonial networks facilitated movement and communication, indigenous actors played a decisive role in the movement's growth, often reshaping it in ways that diverged significantly from its Western origins.

As evangelicalism spread, it encountered diverse cultural and religious environments. In many cases, new converts came from non-Christian backgrounds and had to negotiate the relationship between their inherited traditions and their new faith. Some rejected their former practices outright, viewing them as incompatible with Christianity. Others sought to reinterpret or integrate elements of their cultural heritage into their new religious identity. This process created a spectrum of responses, from strict separation to creative adaptation, and raised ongoing concerns about syncretism and authenticity.

A particularly important development in this period was the rise of Pentecostal and charismatic forms of evangelicalism. These movements emphasized the immediate presence and power of the Holy Spirit, expressed through practices such as speaking in tongues, healing, and prophecy. Pentecostalism proved especially effective in the "majority world," where its emphasis on spiritual power resonated with existing religious sensibilities. It offered a form of Christianity that addressed both this-worldly needs—health, prosperity, protection—and ultimate spiritual concerns. In doing so, it often competed directly with local religious traditions on their own terms, engaging in what has been described as "spiritual warfare."

The demographic center of evangelicalism shifted dramatically during this period. By the early twenty-first century, the majority of evangelicals lived outside the West, with particularly strong concentrations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In contrast, evangelicalism began to decline or plateau in parts of Europe and, to a lesser extent, North America. This shift had significant implications for the movement's identity, as theological emphases, ethical priorities, and cultural expressions increasingly reflected non-Western perspectives.

Evangelical expansion was also facilitated by its organizational flexibility. Unlike more hierarchical forms of Christianity, evangelicalism operated through a wide range of networks, including churches, mission agencies, educational institutions, and media platforms. This decentralized structure allowed for rapid growth and adaptation, enabling local leaders to take initiative and develop forms of ministry suited to their contexts.

At the same time, evangelicalism became deeply embedded in modern social structures. It established schools, universities, and charitable organizations, contributing to education, healthcare, and development in many parts of the world. It also began to exert influence in political and cultural spheres, forming significant voting blocs and shaping public discourse in various countries. This growing influence brought both opportunities and challenges, as evangelicals navigated the complexities of power, responsibility, and public engagement.

The expansion of evangelicalism thus reveals both its strengths and its tensions. Its adaptability and missionary zeal enabled it to grow rapidly and to take root in diverse contexts. Its emphasis on personal conversion and spiritual experience made it accessible and compelling to many. Yet this very flexibility also introduced questions about coherence and continuity. As evangelicalism diversified, maintaining a shared identity became more complex.

What emerges from this chapter is a picture of a movement in motion—expanding, evolving, and increasingly shaped by global dynamics. Evangelicalism is no longer primarily a Western phenomenon exported abroad; it is a global network of communities that both inherit and reinterpret a common tradition. Its future will depend on how it continues to negotiate the balance between unity and diversity, tradition and innovation, local expression and global connection.

Chapter 4 — Modern challenges

As evangelicalism expanded across the globe, it entered deeply into the currents of modernity—and in doing so, encountered a series of challenges that tested its core commitments. These challenges were not merely external pressures but often struck at the heart of evangelical identity, forcing the movement to reconsider its understanding of Scripture, doctrine, culture, and community.

Modernity, as Stackhouse frames it, is characterized by differentiation of social spheres, confidence in human reason and progress, global interconnectedness, and a heightened emphasis on the individual. Evangelicalism, in many ways, proved highly compatible with these traits. Its stress on personal conversion aligned with individualism; its flexible structures suited rapidly changing societies; and its global missionary networks thrived in an increasingly interconnected world. Yet this compatibility came at a cost. The same forces that enabled evangelical growth also threatened to reshape or even undermine its foundational convictions.

One of the most significant challenges concerns the **Bible and doctrine**. Evangelicalism is fundamentally biblicist, placing Scripture at the center of its faith and practice. Modern biblical criticism, however, introduced new methods of interpreting the Bible that questioned traditional assumptions about its authorship, historical reliability, and theological coherence. Alongside this, liberal theology sought to reinterpret Christian doctrine in light of modern knowledge and sensibilities, often downplaying or revising core beliefs such as the Trinity or the divinity of Christ. For evangelicals, these developments posed a direct threat to their theological foundations, forcing them to defend or rethink their understanding of Scripture and doctrine.

A second major challenge arises from **science and secularism**. The modern scientific worldview, with its emphasis on empirical evidence and natural explanations, has often been perceived as in tension with traditional religious beliefs. Debates over issues such as evolution exemplify this conflict. More broadly, secularization has reduced the social authority of religion in many contexts, leading to indifference or skepticism toward evangelical claims. Evangelicals have responded in various ways, from outright rejection of certain scientific theories to attempts at integration and dialogue.

A third area of tension involves **imperialism and social justice**. The historical association of missionary activity with colonial expansion has led to critical reassessments of evangelical missions. While evangelicals have contributed significantly to education, healthcare, and social reform, they have also been implicated in cultural domination and the suppression of indigenous traditions. In the contemporary period,

questions of social justice—addressing poverty, inequality, racism, and other systemic issues—have become increasingly prominent. Evangelicals differ widely in how they engage these concerns, with some emphasizing personal transformation and others advocating structural change.

The encounter with **religious alternatives** presents another challenge. In a globalized world, evangelicals are no longer insulated within predominantly Christian societies. They interact with adherents of other religions and with a wide range of spiritual options. This pluralistic environment raises questions about the uniqueness of the gospel and the nature of religious truth. Evangelicals must navigate the tension between maintaining exclusive truth claims and engaging respectfully with diverse perspectives.

Perhaps one of the most profound internal challenges arises from the very individualism that has helped fuel evangelical growth. Historically, evangelicalism combined personal faith with strong communal structures—small groups, disciplined practices, and shared norms that fostered accountability and spiritual formation. In contemporary contexts, however, these structures have weakened. The rise of consumer culture and personal autonomy has led to phenomena such as “church shopping,” declining institutional loyalty, and the fragmentation of community life. Even practices like charitable giving and participation in worship have become more individualized and sporadic.

Moral and cultural issues further complicate the picture. Debates over sexuality, gender roles, and other ethical questions have created divisions within evangelical communities. In some regions, evangelicals have moved toward more inclusive positions, often influenced by broader cultural shifts. In others, particularly in parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, more traditional stances have been maintained or even reinforced. These differences highlight the growing diversity within global evangelicalism and raise questions about its coherence as a movement.

Despite these challenges, evangelicalism has not simply been a passive recipient of modern pressures. It has actively engaged with modernity, sometimes resisting, sometimes adapting, and often reshaping its own practices in the process. Its ability to combine continuity with change has been a key factor in its resilience.

What emerges from this chapter is a portrait of evangelicalism under strain but also in motion. The challenges it faces are not peripheral; they go to the core of what it means to be evangelical. How the movement responds to these pressures will shape not only its future but also its role within the broader landscape of global Christianity.

Chapter 5 — The end of evangelicalism?

The question posed in this final chapter—whether evangelicalism is coming to an end—is not meant to suggest imminent disappearance, but to probe the movement's current trajectory under the weight of its own success and the pressures of the contemporary world. Evangelicalism has grown into a vast global force, yet that very expansion has generated tensions that raise doubts about its coherence, integrity, and future direction.

One major area of concern is **mission**. Evangelicals have long been defined by their commitment to spreading the gospel, but the nature of that mission is increasingly contested. Should it be understood as conquest, aiming to replace other religions? As cooperation, working alongside others for shared goals? Or as something more nuanced, balancing proclamation with dialogue and service? These questions reflect deeper uncertainties about how evangelicals should relate to a pluralistic world in which exclusive truth claims are often viewed with suspicion.

A second challenge involves **politics**. In some contexts, particularly in the United States, evangelicalism has become closely associated with specific political movements and agendas. This alignment has brought significant influence but also considerable controversy. For many observers, the identification of evangelicalism with partisan politics has compromised its moral and spiritual credibility. The emergence of "exvangelicals"—individuals who have distanced themselves from the movement—signals a growing disillusionment with what is perceived as a distortion of its original priorities.

At the same time, evangelicals in other parts of the world face very different political realities, ranging from marginalization to outright persecution. This diversity complicates any attempt to generalize about evangelical political engagement. What appears as problematic entanglement in one context may be experienced as necessary advocacy or even survival in another.

A third and perhaps most paradoxical issue concerns **success itself**. Evangelicalism's remarkable growth has brought increased visibility, resources, and influence. Evangelicals now operate major institutions, shape public discourse, and contribute significantly to global development efforts. Yet success can dilute the very qualities that fueled the movement's rise. Comfort, cultural acceptance, and material prosperity may weaken the urgency of conversion and the depth of spiritual commitment. The danger is that evangelicalism becomes a cultural identity or a social force rather than a transformative religious experience.

This tension is vividly illustrated by situations in which widespread Christian affiliation does not translate into corresponding ethical transformation. The example of Rwanda, where large numbers of professing Christians were involved in the 1994 genocide, raises troubling questions about the depth and efficacy of evangelical conversion. It suggests that outward expressions of faith—songs, sermons, institutional presence—do not necessarily produce the kind of moral renewal that evangelicalism proclaims as its goal.

Global diversity further complicates the picture. Evangelicalism is no longer centered in the West, and its future will be shaped increasingly by communities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These communities often bring different theological emphases, cultural practices, and ethical priorities. While this diversity is a source of vitality, it also raises questions about unity. Can evangelicalism remain a coherent movement when its expressions vary so widely?

Internal tensions persist as well. Debates over issues such as sexuality, biblical interpretation, and social engagement reveal deep divisions within the movement. These conflicts are not easily resolved, as they often involve competing interpretations of what it means to be faithful to the gospel. The very characteristics that define evangelicalism—its biblicism, its pragmatism, its populism—can pull it in different directions.

Despite these challenges, Stackhouse does not conclude that evangelicalism is simply collapsing. Rather, he frames the current moment as a period of testing. The movement faces the same fundamental question that has confronted Christians in every age: whether it will remain oriented toward what it understands as the Kingdom of God or become absorbed by alternative priorities, whether political, cultural, or economic.

Evangelicalism's future, then, is not predetermined. It will depend on how its adherents respond to the tensions inherent in their tradition—between faithfulness and adaptation, conviction and compromise, unity and diversity. The end of evangelicalism, if it comes, will not necessarily be a sudden disappearance but a gradual transformation into something else, something that may or may not retain the defining features that have shaped it thus far.

What remains clear is that evangelicalism continues to matter. Its global presence, its cultural influence, and its internal debates ensure that it will remain a significant force in the religious landscape for the foreseeable future. The real question is not simply whether it will endure, but what form it will take as it moves into the future.

Coda

Evangelicalism, as traced across this brief study, resists any final, tidy encapsulation. It is neither a fixed system nor a singular institution, but a living tradition marked by continuity and change, coherence and tension. What emerges from its history is not a stable essence but a recognizable pattern—a way of being Christian that persists even as it adapts to new circumstances.

At its core, evangelicalism remains oriented around the gospel: the conviction that God has acted decisively in Jesus Christ to bring salvation, and that this message must be both personally embraced and actively proclaimed. This dual emphasis—on conversion and mission—has given evangelicalism its distinctive energy. It is a movement that calls individuals to transformation while simultaneously seeking to transform the world.

Yet the very features that have enabled evangelicalism to flourish also generate ongoing challenges. Its biblicism provides a strong foundation but invites disputes over interpretation. Its populism fosters accessibility but risks fragmentation. Its pragmatism encourages innovation but can blur the line between faithfulness and expediency. Its global expansion brings vitality but complicates unity. Evangelicalism is thus characterized not by the resolution of tensions but by their continual negotiation.

The relationship between evangelicalism and modernity is particularly revealing. Evangelicalism has thrived in modern conditions precisely because it shares certain underlying assumptions: the importance of the individual, the possibility of change, and the value of adaptability. At the same time, these same conditions threaten to erode the communal, doctrinal, and spiritual structures that sustain the movement. Evangelicalism is both a product of modernity and a critic of it, drawing strength from its environment while also contending with its pressures.

Globalization has further transformed evangelicalism, shifting its center of gravity away from its historic Western base. The movement now speaks with many voices, shaped by diverse cultural contexts and experiences. This plurality enriches evangelicalism but also raises questions about its identity. What binds together such a wide array of expressions? The answer lies less in uniformity than in a shared orientation toward the gospel and a common set of practices that express that orientation.

Throughout its history, evangelicalism has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for renewal. It began as a movement of revival, calling Christians back to what it perceived as authentic faith. That impulse toward renewal has never disappeared. Each generation

of evangelicals faces the task of rediscovering and rearticulating the gospel in its own context, often in tension with both inherited traditions and contemporary trends.

The future of evangelicalism will depend on how it navigates this task. Will it maintain the depth of its theological commitments while remaining open to new insights? Will it preserve its sense of mission without becoming entangled in the pursuit of power? Will it sustain meaningful communities in an increasingly individualistic world? These questions do not admit easy answers, but they define the horizon within which evangelicalism must continue to evolve.

What can be said with confidence is that evangelicalism is unlikely to disappear. Its flexibility, its global reach, and its capacity to engage both the heart and the mind ensure its ongoing relevance. At the same time, it will not remain unchanged. Like all living traditions, it will continue to develop, shaped by the interplay of conviction and context.

The story of evangelicalism, then, is not one of completion but of continuation. It is an unfolding narrative, carried forward by countless individuals and communities who, in their own ways, seek to live out the implications of the gospel.